



# THE ORIGIN

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## FROM SOFTWARE TAKES TWO STEPS FORWARD AND ONE STEP BACK WITH ARMORED CORE VI FIRES OF RUBICON



nderwhelming.

That's the easiest word to describe From Software's office. Tucked in a nondescript building in Tokyo, Japan's Shibuya ward, the company takes up at least nine floors of a 13-story building. Inside, we're only allowed to see a small lobby and two conference

rooms – one for our interview and another for a hands-off demo. Each is stale, white, and plain, with only a few framed pictures of Elden Ring review quotes to mark that, indeed, From Software is here.

On the one hand, this tracks for most Japanese game development studios. Compared to their Western counterparts – which now favor more open-air, comfortable designs – Japanese studios still lean towards the traditional cubicle farm. Nevertheless, given its pedigree, you catch yourself expecting more when you walk inside From – some kind of pageantry. After all, it is one of the most celebrated game studios in the world. Making some of the best games in the world. Not that you'd ever know from the outside – or even inside.

It's exciting to be here; a lot of history has happened within these walls. Given its importance, it's also a bit of a letdown.

We're here to be the first people in the world to see Armored Core VI Fires of Rubicon. It's the next in line after a near-unprecedented run of successful games, starting with the lauded Souls series, then moving on to 2015's Bloodborne and 2019's Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice, before reaching a critical and commercial apex with 2022's massively successful Elden Ring.

Armored Core VI is both a return to roots for From and a new frontier. It's the first Armored Core game in over a decade, a series that spans nearly the company's entire history. If you've become a fan of From over the last ten years, it looks unlike anything you might expect the studio to do now that it's famous for slow, methodical, and brutally difficult RPGs. It's fast, hectic, and flashy. It looks like the games From was making before it captured lightning in a bottle with its Souls formula.

And yet, despite that pedigree and recent history, like From Software's office, parts of Armored Core VI leave us underwhelmed. Other parts, excited and hopeful.

It's complicated.

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DEVELOPER From Software RELEASE August 25



ARQUEBUS LASER RIFLE



BALAM ASSAULT RIFLE



BALAM PILE



BALAM SHOTGUN

### NEVER AN OPTION

Comparatively, from a critical and commercial standpoint, Armored Core was never a big deal. But for From, it's one of the most important releases in its catalog.

Founded in 1986 by Naotoshi Zin, From Software originally made business software before trying its hand at game development in the mid-'90s with a trilogy of action RPGs called King's Field, released for the original PlayStation between 1994 and 1996. While King's Field would later inspire its Souls games, Armored Core laid the real foundation for From as a game studio.

Funded in part by Sony, the original Armored Core was released in 1997. It wasn't a massive commercial hit, but it was, at least, an impressive outing for a then-still new game developer. Most notable was the game's approach to mecha customization, which allowed players to choose what weapons they took in their Armored Core's left and right hands, different parts of their bodies, and even the design of their color and logo. As *Next Generation* magazine pointed out in its July 1997 issue, "well over" 200,000 combinations were possible.

In Armored Core, a massive war called the "Great Destruction" has left Earth mostly uninhabitable. In this dystopia, giant corporations have taken rise. They employ pilots called Ravens, operating Armored Cores, who take jobs for whoever is willing to pay the most. Players would take on different

missions and complete objectives to earn money to upgrade parts of their Armored Core. They could also choose how moral they thought a mission was.

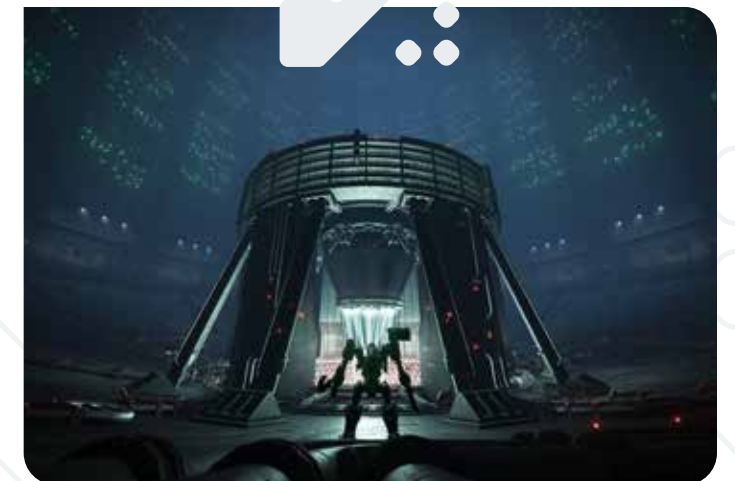
Armored Core remained part of From Software in the following decades, as the studio released 15 games across nearly as many platforms between 1997 and 2013. It also released dozens of other games in that time – such as the cult classic survival horror game Kuon, the Monster Hunter spin-off Monster Hunter Diary: Poka Poka Airou Village, and even a few different mecha games, such as the Xbox 360 Kinect game Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor and Mobile Suit Gundam Unicorn.

But in 2009, it released the first game in now a long-running genre that would become its bread and butter: Demon's Souls. Eschewing typical game design, it was brutally difficult, impressively obtuse, and unlike much else that came before. And miraculously, despite those facts, it became increasingly popular.

The ensuing Dark Souls series, Bloodborne, Sekiro, and Elden Ring (now called the Soulsborne games), made From, and by extension, its figurehead, Hidetaka Miyazaki, who made his directorial debut in 2006 on Armored Core 4 and then directed all of the Soulsborne games except Dark Souls II, household names in the video game world. They're now considered some of the most influential games of all time and spawned numerous imitators of varying degrees of quality, such as Koei Tecmo's Nioh series and Respawn Entertainment's Jedi Survivor series.

Armored Core took a backseat as the Soulsborne games took off; its last release was in 2013 with Armored Core: Verdict Day. But, according to producer Yasunori Ogura, the studio always planned to return to the series with which it first cut its teeth.

"Armored Core was always in the back of our minds," Ogura says via translator. "We're not a huge company, so of course, we have to consider resource allocation and timing and [development] timelines. And so it did take a little longer than we would have hoped. But it was never really an option not to make another Armored Core."





The seeds of Armored Core VI began in 2017. By the following year, Miyazaki and a small group of team members were building prototypes. And then, in 2019, after the release of Sekiro, a director finally came on board: Sekiro's lead designer, Masaru Yamamura, making his directorial debut at From Software.

Yamamura is now one of the few people to direct a game at From in the last decade that isn't Miyazaki.

He says it's been stressful taking this new role; he had to learn how to share ideas with his team and keep the vision consistent throughout (around a third of the entire company is now on Armored Core VI, we're told). But a few years into his new job, he's learning what kind of director he wants to be.

"Some directors will just be very top-down, and it's everything they say goes," Yamamura says. "Some directors like to get in there and like to get these ideas and discuss. I very much appreciate that second style. Rather than people fearing me [coming] along and saying, 'Oh, no, I'm going to be told what to do,' it's a discussion. It's like, 'Okay, I get to take this person's ideas and see how we can incorporate that. See how we can mix them with other ideas on the floor.' This is the approach that I've come to enjoy."

But there is the unavoidable proverbial crater left by Elden Ring, quickly considered not only one of



From's best games but one of the greatest games of all time after its release in February 2022. As producer and director, respectively, Ogura and Yamamura admit they have a lot to live up to.

"It is scary," Ogura admits. "But you have to just sort of steel yourself and say, 'Alright, well, let's make this one count as well.'"

Making Armored Core VI count is, in some ways, keeping it in line with the Armored Core tenants.

Which is to say, it's not a Souls game. And that's an important distinction.

#### FORWARD THINKING AND DIVINATION

Despite the naming convention, Armored Core VI is a reboot of the series, though it maintains many ideas from the first game more than 20 years before. Similar to the original, a large-scale disaster – thought to be related to a powerful substance called Coral – decimates the planet of Rubicon. Now, 50 years later, trace amounts of the resource have been rediscovered, inciting a war between massive corporations controlling the military-industrial complex and the planet's indigenous factions. The protagonist, freelance mercenary C4-621, or callsign "Raven," arrives at Rubicon and is soon cast into the global conflict.

Historically, the mecha genre has always been grounds to explore real-world sociopolitical issues, and that's no different for the Armored Core series. Though in 2023, a world owned by megacorporations on the brink of environmental destruction feels far more accurate to life than it may have even in 1997. A point that isn't lost on the development team.

"These are key themes that have always run through the Armored Core series," Yamamura says. "So perhaps it was a little bit of forward thinking and divination when it came to that aspect."

Rubicon is a planet set aflame by industry. Alien structures perch above oceans of sand; monoliths pierce cloudy skies above mountain ranges; and factory assembly lines stretch out like a castle's ramparts. It's visually striking, and the emphasis on an impossible scale is dizzying.

But unlike the Soulsborne games, Armored Core VI does not feature an interconnected world. Instead, it returns to the series' stage-based roots, with distinct maps featuring segmented missions culminating in a boss fight. According to From, each stage varies in scale; some are large, inviting exploration and featuring side objectives; others are linear sprints toward a singular goal.

"If you're thinking of it in terms of [...] a game like Bloodborne, one Armored Core map is like one area

# WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DIE?

Armored Core VI alleviates some of the pain of death compared to the Soulsborne games. *Some.*

Notably, when you die, you just reload the last checkpoint and try again, keeping all your resources; don't expect to have to run after some equivalent of "Souls," or risk losing all your progress. You're also given the option to access the assembly screen to recalibrate your mech and its attachments to try for a better approach.

While this may seem more forgiving than previous From Software games, boss fights still carry crushing defeat. Fighting any boss in the game takes a while, so death means repeated time and effort. Masochists rejoice.



in Bloodborne," Yamamura says. "Extrapolating it to that human scale, [the map] will be used across three to four missions."

We see two missions totaling two hours of gameplay and repeat boss attempts. The first is a short prologue mission – though we're not allowed to disclose details – that establishes and tests the fundamentals of piloting an Armored Core mecha. After getting our bearings, we witness a stage from Chapter Two on Grid 086, a sky-high installation housing an orbital lift called the Intercontinental Cargo Launcher. Raven must use the device to cross an ocean separating him from the Central Icefield, a location significant to the game's story.

Outside, plumes of smoke brim into the atmosphere like geysers, the grid's network of steel beams contrast miles of empty airspace below, and evidence of production litters the stage in various forms of cargo. The scale and level design is fantastic, but we're still hoping for a stronger hook that makes us want to explore the world. Based on what we saw, levels are a bit bland. Especially interiors; we spend our time quickly going from point A to B, without much impetus to spend time poking around. Compared to other From games, all with fantastic, believable worlds, the lifelessness of Rubicon, though narratively appropriate, leaves us a bit cold.





## A NEW DIRECTION

From the jump, we see what From calls “omnidirectional” game design, emphasizing the verticality of its massive levels and the ways players use their Armored Cores to get around. Jetpacks are essential for ascending, scaling large walls, and gaining better positioning against enemies. The Quick Boost serves as a dodge mechanic, while the Assault Boost propels the mech forward, allowing you to cover long distances quickly. Depending on the load-out, you can use an arsenal of shields, melee weapons, and ranged rifles to eliminate foes. The unique aspect of controlling mecha instead of humanoids is the ability to perform many of these actions simultaneously. In fact, you won’t make much progress – especially against bosses – until adopting this mindset.

“This omnidirectional stuff [...] it takes time to learn,” says Atsuo Yoshimura, a long-time producer at Bandai Namco, who most recently worked as chief producer on Elden Ring. “For the past 10 years, people have kept playing the Soulsborne and Sekiro games. The way they move is very horizontal, but [in Armored Core VI], they need to also apply vertical elements. On top of that, they also must figure out how to apply vertical movements to make sure they can get behind enemies.”

“Honestly speaking, we are having difficulty properly communicating this to our target audience,” Yoshimura later admits. “That’s something we need to figure out.”

And while we do agree that the messaging around the omnidirectional game design is messy and confusing, in practice, it’s intuitive. When in control of a mech, it makes sense to be able to jet-pack around freely and move at breakneck speeds. It also makes traversing through levels a breeze – though again, at least in the levels we see, leaves little impetus to poke around or stop to smell the roses. The game focuses on momentum, so throttling toward your objective makes the most sense. Despite its largeness, our mech navigates open air-space gracefully, its frame resembling an ice skater as it weaves around obstacles. It looks more akin to something like Bayonetta or Nier: Automata than, say, Dark Souls or Elden Ring. It represents a complete tempo change after a decade of slower-paced From games.

Even though it stresses that Armored Core VI is not a Soulsborne title, From has cultivated a particular fanbase in the last ten years. Many players could find the differences jarring. This game is arcadey in its generous checkpoints and scoring system, and outside of boss battles, it offers lenient action compared to Dark Souls. In the most straightforward terms, it’s very similar to past Armored Core games, albeit with the robust boss fights the developer is now known for.

Back in the demo, a small handful of Muscle Tracers (a recurring enemy type in the series) guard the entrance to the grid’s interior. As the Armored Core’s stamina depletes mid-flight, it drops to the ground, sword in hand, and begins slashing through opponents’ armor with its blue-hued Pulse Blade. While certain Muscle Tracers block ranged attacks with shields or high mobility, few are strong enough to sustain high-damage melee strikes. When combined with the speed of the Assault Boost, attacks adopt an empowering, cinematic quality. However,

if used indiscriminately, these big offensives can result in poor positioning and death.

You can restore your health three times via a repair mechanic, with periodic restock opportunities in specific areas. From says no upgrades are available to this mechanic, so players must strategically use their repair charges. Managing your health and general performance is essential, as it ties into Armored Core’s scoring system and economy.

“You get rewards at the end of each mission,” Yamamura says. “There are certain deductions or rewards based on your performance, how much damage you take, and additional objectives you’ve cleared. You get a new base income from missions, and then you can use that to buy parts and upgrade your mech.”

## ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

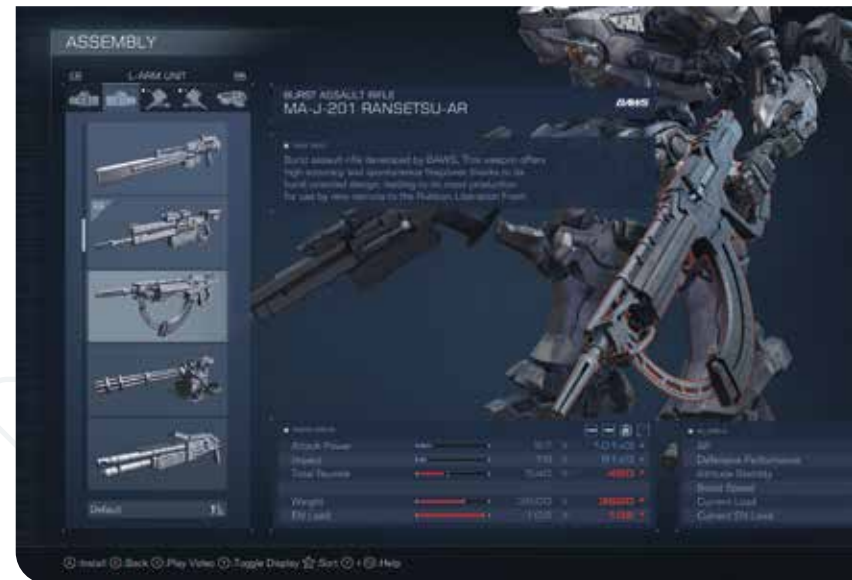
Every Armored Core features 12 customizable parts within four different categories: four “Unit” slots for artillery, swords, and shields; four “Frame” segments, accounting for the mech’s head, core, arms, and legs; three “Internal” parts for customizing Fire Control Systems (lock-on targeting), boosters, and generators for customizing energy reserves; and lastly, one “Expansion” item which enables unique abilities like a massive electrical explosion.

While we didn’t see most of them in action, dozens of attachments, weapons, and parts are within each category, totaling hundreds of individual components and combinations. As a From employee shows us his favorite loadout, we see tons of different rifles, shotguns, grenade launchers, chainguns, bazookas, pulse cannons, double-bladed swords, and shields. Thousands of possible combinations exist, but players must consider the mech’s frame and weight capacity during assembly.

“Don’t take too many notes,” a nearby PR representative nervously laughs as he realizes our debug build has every customization option unlocked. Even if we wanted to, keeping track of the numerous components flying across the screen is hard. For fans of proper nouns, we quickly jot down words like “Pulse Scutum,” “Vertical Missile Launcher,” and “Stun Needle Launcher,” the latter firing a projectile that explodes into a burst of electricity.

“There will be extensive cosmetic options – near infinite combinations of user-generated aesthetics, from decals, paint jobs, finishes, and weathering,” Yoshimura says, exaggerating a bit. “People can upload and share their creations online.” Considering the popularity of fashion in the From Software community – there’s an entire “Fashion Souls” subreddit dedicated to sharing in-game outfits – this is a smart inclusion in Armored Core VI.

After clearing a few indistinct hallways and restocking health and ammunition, we finally encounter what we’ve been waiting for – a boss battle.



BALAM  
2-LEG



ARQUEBUS  
2-LEG







A large door opens, and a massive invention called the EC-0804 Smart Cleaner activates, dashing at us with incredible speed. Colloquially referred to as the “Roomba boss” by internal staff, the machine’s base resembles a round, self-cleaning vacuum, with long, crab-like arms dripping with molten metal extruding from its sides.

The Smart Cleaner strikes its arms together with intimidating power, trying to swat us like a fly. The sound of metal clashing against metal is haunting, but now we’re hovering above the armored creation after evading its approach, peering down the chimney affixed to its rear. Before we fully recover, red-hot metal bursts out from the furnace, forcing a mid-air dodge to create adequate distance from the machine’s area-of-effect attack.

Finally, we get our first glimpse of the boss’s weak point: a small, open vent between its arms. We fire a missile barrage, and while its armor plates deflect much damage, the Smart Cleaner’s stagger bar begins to build, immobilizing the enemy if filled.

“Regardless of whether it’s mecha or humanoid, or the scale involved, one thing from our learnings [making Soulsborne games] we’ve taken is that observational aspect of boss battles and enemy encounters where you have to observe what the enemy is doing, watch their attack patterns, watch their attack animations, and then respond accordingly,” says Yamamura. “You take that input, and then, you know, that’s feedback to the player. And the player has to revise their tactics based on that. So that’s one element that carries between these series. Plus, you have the kind of combat that is integral to being able to fly around

freely and use multiple weapons simultaneously.”

Compared to everything else we see in the game, boss fights are a true and expected standout. While the normal engagements look run-of-the-mill, at least compared to what we were expecting, bosses are cinematic and climactic. As the fight plays out, the entire room chants and groans after each successful and unsuccessful strike and attempt. It’s exhilarating and a welcome highlight.

Like clockwork, the machine rushes us and destroys our Armored Core in only two hits. Thus begins the excruciating tried-and-true journey trying to defeat the boss. More than half a dozen tries later, and our Armored Core widdles the boss down to its last shred of health. But like a cruel joke, we run out of ammo at the last second, and the cleaner disassembles us once again.



ARQUEBUS  
4-LEG



BALAM  
TANK



BALTEUS

## VERDICT DAY

Armored Core VI is in an unenviable position: being a From Software game in 2023.

While Armored Core has a decades-long history and an intense fanbase of its own, it’s undeniable that the studio is and will ostensibly always be most well-known for its Soulsborne games. The vast majority of its fanbase at this point is most accustomed to its methodical RPGs.

This game is not that; it’s clear from the moment we see it in action that the Armored Core series is not changing to fit what made From popular back in 2009. Through and through, Armored Core VI is an Armored Core game – for better and worse.

But the comparisons are inevitable and unavoidable; the change in gameplay is jarring after more than half a dozen Soulsborne games. And while there was much to be excited for in what we saw – predictably, the boss fights look fantastic, though they’re notably the one area From says it took Souls inspiration – there are plenty of areas we’re nervous about. Playing any Souls game, even basic encounters with grunt enemies can be memorable, as can nearly every inch of their game worlds. Of what we’ve seen of Armored Core, though the world looks great, the areas and encounters that aren’t boss fights lack the same emotional pull.

Inevitably, Armored Core fans and some contingent of Soulsborne players will welcome the change of pace. Others might find it a bit dated after a run of revolutionary From games. We feel confident saying that because that’s where we’re both sitting after seeing the game – somewhere in the middle of excitement and trepidation.

But not for nothing, From has earned some trust over the last several years; it doesn’t usually make bad games. Or at least, not recently, it hasn’t. And so, for now, we’re acknowledging our misgivings while also giving the studio some benefit of the doubt.

Time will tell if Rubicon becomes the next From Software world we lose ourselves inside. ■

